

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 NEAE-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00
PM-05 H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01
PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 TRSE-00 AID-05 EB-08
SIL-01 LAB-04 COME-00 SSC-01 HA-05 AGRE-00 DOTE-00
INT-05 /098 W
-----040093 301429Z /40

P R 301230Z DEC 77
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9406
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY RABAT
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
AMEMBASSY VALLETTA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TUNIS 9248

USEEC

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, TS, PGOV
SUBJECT: THE TUNISIAN GOVERNMENTAL CRISIS-- A DESCRIPTION
AND ASSESSMENT

REF: (A) TUNIS 9156, (B) TUNIS 9166, (C) TUNIS 9128

1. SUMMARY. NOW THAT THE DUST HAS SETTLED AFTER THE SHOCK
AND REVERBERATIONS RESULTING FROM THE UNEXPECTED CABINET
CHANGES IN TUNISIAN GOVERNMENT OVER LAST WEEKEND, I THOUGHT
IT WOULD BE USEFUL TO REVIEW BRIEFLY EVENTS AS THEY
UNFOLDED AS WELL AS THE REACTIONS THEY GENERATED, AND TO
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ATTEMPT TO ASSESS THEIR PROBABLE SIGNIFICANCE. BY NOW IT
APPEARS THAT PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA HAS SURVIVED HIS
GOVERNMENT'S "MINI CRISIS," AND THAT IN FACT HE NOW HAS A
CABINET CONSIDERABLY MORE HOMOGENIOUS THAN BEFORE. AT
THE SAME TIME, THE INFLUENCE OF DEFENSE MINISTER
FARHAT, PARTY DIRECTOR SAYAH, AND THE PRESIDENT'S SONE
HABIB BOURGUIBA JUNIOR HAS MARKEDLY INCREASED.

THESE

THREE MEN ARE ALL SAID TO CALL FOR A HARDER LINE IN DEALING WITH PUBLIC DISORDER IN GENERAL AND WITH GROWING MANIFESTATIONS OF LABOR UNREST IN PARTICULAR. THEY ALSO ARE CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH NOUIRA, WHO CONTINUES TO ENJOY PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S CONFIDENCE AND SUPPORT. THIS GOVERNMENT CRISIS WAS CLEARLY THE RESULT OF DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE CABINET OVER HOW THE REGIME SHOULD DEAL WITH THE RISING CHALLENGE POSED BY THE UGTT AND LABOR LEADER HABIB ACHOUR, AND THESE DIFFERENCES NOW APPEAR TO BE RESOLVED. NOUIRA IS IN GREATER CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT THAN EVER BEFORE. THE REGIME'S BASIC CONFLICT WITH THE INCREASINGLY POLITICIZED LABOR MOVEMENT REMAINS. HOW THIS CHALLENGE IS DEALT WITH WILL BE THE TEST OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT, AND QUITE POSSIBLY OF NOUIRA'S FUTURE AS WELL. END SUMMARY.

2. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS. THE "MINI CRISIS," AS IT IS NOW BEING REFERRED TO IN THE LOCAL PRESS, BROKE IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON OF DECEMBER 23 WITH THE SURPRISE ANNOUNCEMENT THAT INTERIOR MINISTER TAHAR BELKHODJA HAD BEEN RELIEVED OF HIS RESPONSIBILITIES BY PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA, AND THAT PRIME MINISTER NOUIRA, ACTING ON THE PRESIDENT'S INSTRUCTIONS, HAD INSTALLED DEFENSE MINISTER ABDALLAH FARHAT AS THE NEW INTERIOR MINISTER AD INTERIM. AT THE CONFIDENTIAL

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SAME TIME, ABDELMAJID BOUSLAMA, CHIEF OF SURETE, WAS REMOVED AND ARMY COLONEL BEN ALI, A MEMBER OF FARHAT'S STAFF AT DEFENSE, WAS NAMED AS HIS REPLACEMENT. REPORTEDLY THIS TURN OF EVENTS CAME AS A SURPRISE TO BELKHODJA, WHO WAS VACATIONING IN FRANCE, AS WELL AS TO MOST OTHER SENIOR GOVT OFFICIALS.

3. REPERCUSSIONS WERE VERY QUICK, AND IN LESS THAN 48 HOURS FIVE ADDITIONAL MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT HAD EITHER BEEN FIRED, OR MORE PROBABLY, HAD RESIGNED IN PROTEST AGAINST BELKHODJA'S REMOVAL. THE FIRST TO GO WAS NATIONAL ECONOMY MINISTER LASRAM, WHO RESIGNED ON DEC 24. IN QUICK SUCCESSION, HE WAS FOLLOWED BY FOREIGN MINISTER CHATTY, HEALTH MINISTER KOOLI, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE GOVERNMENT BELHAJ AMOR, AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS MINISTER ENNACEUR. AND BY DEC 26, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENSE BENNOURN NUMBER TWO IN DEFENSE MINISTRY, ANNOUNCED HIS RESIGNATION. (THE GOVERNMENT SAID HE HAD BEEN RELIEVED OF HIS DUTIES.) WE ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE HASSAN BELKHODJA SUBMITTED HIS

LETTER OF RESIGNATION BUT SUBSEQUENTLY WITHDREW IT. THIS

WAS FOLLOWED BY AT LEAST TWO LOWER-LEVEL CHANGES AT THE INTERIOR MINISTRY. DEPENDING ON WHICH SOTORY ONE LISTENS TO, ABDELKRIM MOUSSA, DIRECTOR OF POLITICAL AFFAIRS, AND ABDEL HAMID SKHIRI, DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL SERVICES (INTELLIGENCE), EITHER RESIGNED OR WERE FIRED.

4. NOUIRA PROBABLY DID NOT PLAN TO HAVE FARHAT REMAIN AT INTERIOR LONG, AS HE WAS PROINTEPLY NAMED MINISTER AD INTERIM, AND IT SEEMS THAT FARHAT WAS GIVEN THE JOB ON A TEMPORARY BASIS TO ENSURE THAT PUBLIC ORDER WAS KEPTN UNTIL A NEW PERMANENT INTERIOR MINISTRY CHIEF COULD BE FOUND. WE BELIEVE NOUIRA EXPECTED THE UGTT TO PROTEST IN SOME MANNER.

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5. HABIB ACHOUR AND THE UGTT WERE INDEED QUICK TO RESPOND. ON DEC 24 THE UGTT ISSUED A STATEMENT UNDER ACHOUR'S SIGNATURE HARSHLY CRITICIZING THE FARHAT AND BEN ALI NOMINATIONS AS A "HARDENING" OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND WARNING THAT THE "TEST" WOULD BE SEEN IN A FEW DAYS. ALTHOUGH I AM GETTING AHEAD OF OUR STORY A BIT, THIS TEST MAY WELL TAKE PLACE SHORTLY, AS ON DEC 28 IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT THE MINERS FEDERATION WOULD GO ON A STRIKE OF INDEFINITE DURATION ON DEC 30 (REPORTEDLY FIRST SUCH INDEFINITE SECTOR-WIDE STRIKE CALLED SINCE INDEPENDENCE) AND THAT THE RAILROAD FEDERATION WOULD BEGIN A THREE-DAY NATIONAL STRIKE BEGINNING JAN 2. A SOLIDARITY STRIKE OF PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS IN THE PHOSPHATE MINING DISTRICT IN SOUTHERN TUNISIA IS

BEING ORGANIZED TO TAKE PLACE ON OR ABOUT THIS DATE.

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9407
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6. TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, IT SEEMS THAT NOUIRA HAD COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT HE COULD NOT CONTINUE TO HEAD THE GOVERNMENT WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO COUNT ON THE FULL SUPPORT OF HIS MINISTER OF INTERIOR. AND BELKHODJA FOR HIS PART HAD MADE IT CLEAR BOTH IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEBATES AND IN RECENT MEETINGS OF THE PARTY'S POLITICAL BUREAU THAT HE WAS NOT PREPARED TO USE THE POLICE AGAINST STRIKING WORKERS. ACCORDING TO THE STORY, NOUIRA WENT TO THE PRESIDENT IN THE MORNING OF DEC 23 WITH A "HIM OR ME" ULTIMATUM. THE PRESIDENT REPORTEDLY GAVE HIS RELUCTANT CONSENT TO BELKHODJA'S REMOVAL AND FARHAT WAS SWORN IN AN HOUR OR SO LATER. FROM ALL INDICATIONS, HOWEVER, NEITHER
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NOUIRA NOR BOURGUIBA EXPECTED THIS DECISION TO CAUSE SUCH A ROW WITHIN THE CABINET, AND CERTAINLY NOT TO RESULT (DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY) IN THE RESIGNATION OF FIVE OR SIX OF THE MORE SENIOR MEMBERS OF THE GOVERNMENT. ALTHOUGH MOST OF THESE MEN WERE KNOWN AS "MODERATES," NONE HAD BEEN A VOCALLY OUTSPOKEN SUPPORT OF BELKHODJA IN PARTY AND GOVERNMENT COUNCILS.

7. UNEXPECTED OR NOT, THE RAPIDLY DETERIORATING SITUATION REQUIRED PROMPT REPAIR WORK. NOUIRA IMMEDIATELY BEGAN LOOKING FOR QUALIFIED AND RELIABLE MEN TO FILL THE GAPS. REPORTEDLY SOME OF NOUIRA'S FIRST CHOICES TURNED DOWN OFFERS OF CABINET POSITIONS FOR VARIOUS "PERSONAL REASONS." THERE IS EVEN THE STORY THAT NOUIRA OFFERED ENNACEUR THE FINANCE MINISTRY BEFOE KNOWING THAT HE HAD JUST RESIGNED FROM SOCIAL AFFAIRS (THE OFFER WAS SUPPOSEDLY QUICKLY WITHDRAWN.) ANOTHER, AMBASSADOR KHELIL IN BRUSSELS, WHO WAS ANNOUNCED TO BE MINISTER OF INDUSTRY, MINES AND ENERGY,

SUBSEQUENTLY DELINED OFFER FOR "HEALTH REASONS."

8. BY DEC 27, HOWEVER, A NEW GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN PUT TOGETHER. FOR THE MOST PART, THE NEW MINISTRY CHIEFS ALL ARE MEN POSSESSING BOTH CONSIDERABLE GOVERNMENTAL EXPERIENCE AND HIGH PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS. THEY ALSO HAVE APPROPRIATE DESTOURIAN CREDENTIALS AND GEOGRAPHICALLY REPRESENT A LARGE PART OF THE TUNISIAN REPUBLIC, RHATHER THAN COMING FROM THE SAHEL OR TUNIS AS HAS OFTEN BEEN THE CASE PREVIOUSLY. THEY ARE ALO CONSIDERED TO BE MEN OF MODERATION AND DEDICATION, BUT WITH THE EXCEPTION OF FITOURI (FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AND HANNABLIA (INTERIOR), NONE OF THE NEW MINISTERS IS POLITICALL PROMINENT.

9. ASSESSMENT. PERHAPS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT APPOINTMENT
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IS THAT OF THE PRESIDENT'S SON HABIB BOURGUIBA JR. TO THE NEWLY CREATED POST OF SPECIAL ADVISOR TO THE PRESIDENT. NOT ONLY DOES THIS JOB CARRY MINISTERIAL RANK, BUT IN THE LIST OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT PUBLISHED IN THE PRESS ON DEC 28, BOURGUIBA JR. IS SHOWN AFTER NOUIRA AND IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE MINISTER OF JUSTICE, WHO PREVIOUSLY HAD BEEN RANKING MEMBER OF THE GOVERNMENT AFTER THE PRIME MINISTER. BOURGUIBA JR.'S REEMERGENCE COMES AS SOMETHING OF A SURPRISE AS HE HAS TOLD ME ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS OVER THE PAST YEAR THAT HE WANTED TO WITHDRAW GRADUALLY FROM POLITICAL LIFE ALTOGETHER AND TO DEVOTE HIS TIME TO BANKING AND HIS FAMILY. IN THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS, HOWEVER, HE HS BEEN CRITICAL OF THE GROWING PUBLIC DISORDER, AND OF UNNAMED PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR FOMENTING SOCIAL UNREST. THESE PUBLIC REMARKS WERE CLEARLY POINTED AT ACHOUR AND UGTT. REPORTEDLY, HE HAD ALSO URGED BELKHODJA TO BE TOUGHER IN DEALING WITH STUDENT AND LABOR AGITATORS. AT THE SAME TIME, WE UNDERSTAND BOURGUIBA, JR. WAS INCRESINGLY WORRIED ABOUT THE MOUNTING INFLUENCE OF THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE, WASSILA, AND HER CONNECTIONS WITH BELKHODJA, MASMOUDI AND QADHAFI. WASSILA ALSO HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN FLIRTING WITH THE DISSIDENT SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC GROUP LED BY HER COUSIN HASSIB BEN AMMAR AND WITH HABIB ACHOUR, A POLITICAL "FIREND" OF ALL OF THE ABOVE. WITH BOURUIBA JR. NOW IN HIS NEW POSITION AS SPECIAL ADVISR TO THE PRESIDENT, IT CAN BE EXPECTED THAT WASSILA'S INFLUENCE AT THE PALACE AND IN THE GOVERNMENT, AND INDIRECTLY THE INFLUENCE OF HER POLITICAL ALLIES, WILL BE CONSIDERHTPAEDUCED. IN VIEW OF THE LONG STANDING ANIMOSITY EXISTING BETWEEN WASSILA AND NOUIRA, THE PRIME MINISTER CAN ONLY BE PLEASED AT THIS DEVELOPMENT.

10. BOURGUIBA JR. IS KNOWN TO RESPECT NOUIRA AND TO

WORK WELL WITH HIM. THEY SHARE THE SAME OUTLOOKS ON MOST OF TUNISIA'S DOMESTIC ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS, AS THEY DO IN THE FIELD OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. FURTHERMORE, CONFIDENTIAL

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BOURGUIBA JR. GETS ALONG WELL WITH FARHAT AND PSD DIRECTOR SAYAH, WHO APPEAR TO BE NOUIRA'S MOST COMMITTED ALIES. THEY ARE ALSO TWO OF THE MOST POLITICALLY INFLUENTIAL MEN IN TUNISIA, ALONG WITH BOURGUIBA JR. HIMSELF-- AND HABIB ACHOUR. TAKING THESE ELEMENTS INTO CONSIDERATION, I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT NOUIRA'S CONTROL OVER HIS GOVERNMENT AND HIS ABILITY TO RESPOND TO THE GROWING CHALLENGE PRESENTED BY ACHOUR AND THE UGTT HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLY ENHANCED IN THE PAST WEEK. ALTHOUGH THE INSENSITIVE WAY BELKHORYHQYS REMOVAL WAS HANDLED CAUSED NOUIRA UNNECESSARY PROBLEMS WHICH A MORE ASTUTE POLITICAL ANIMAL MIGHT HAVE AVOIDED, NOUIRA HAS ACHIEVED HIS MAIN OBJECTIVE, I.E. THE CREATION OF A CABINET WITH WHICH HE CAN WORK EASILY AND IN WHICH HE HAS CONFIDENCE. IN VIEW OF THE SERIOUS POLICY DIFFERENCES WHICH HAD DEVELOPED BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND HIS INTERIOR MINISTER, BELKHODJA'S EVENTUAL DEPARTURE HAD PROBABLY BECOME INEVITABLE EVEN IF ITS TIMING WAS UNEXPECTED.

11. AS ACHOUR HAS PREDICTED, THE TEST OF NEW GOVERNMENT AND OF HEDI NOUIRA'S STEWARDSHIP IS PROBABLY NOT LONG AWAY. THIS IS ESSENTIALLY A DOMESTIC POLITICAL STRUGGLE OVER THE QUESTION OF EVENTUAL SUCCESSION TO BOURGUIBA. WE BELIEVE NOUIRA'S CHANCES ARE GOOD. HE SEEMS TO HAVE THE RESOLVE TO PREVAIL, AND HE ALSO HAS THE BACKING OF MOST OF THE TUNISIAN POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT, AS WELL AS THE PRESIDENT HIMSELF. MULCAHY

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